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# THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

**The Surrey puma**  
**Does astrology work?**  
**The world of Tom Lethbridge**  
**Sorting out ghosts**  
**MIBs in history**

29





# THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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## Volume 3 Issue 29

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## In next week's issue

Lucid dreams have recently been the subject of study and discussion – and in 1971 rock group the Grateful Dead assisted dream research by asking their audiences to act as telepathic agents. In **Dreams** this and other experiments are described. There are many accounts of people having been kidnapped by UFOs, and in the first of a new series of **Disappearances** we describe one of the biggest abductions of all – that of an army battalion. We show you how to interpret a horoscope in **Astrology** and explore the scientific basis of astrological thinking. The sudden inexplicable appearance of objects may be an argument for 'another world' – see our new series **Other dimensions**. To conclude we look at a phenomenon that has excited philosophers and scientists for 2000 years that is familiar to us all – **Coincidences**.

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# 'As above, so below'

Although astrology has always been regarded as a mysterious and occult art, recent research has suggested it is scientifically valid. In the first part of this series, BRIAN INNES asks: what is a horoscope – and is it possible to use it to predict future events?

EVERY DAY, MANY MILLIONS of people turn to a section of the newspaper with a heading such as 'Your Horoscope for Today', and more than 60 per cent believe what they read there. At parties, guests greet one another: 'What are you?' 'I'm a Libran.' 'Oh good, we should get on together, I'm an Aquarian.'

This is the stuff of the common understanding of astrology, and it is arrant nonsense. A horoscope is a map – a rather simple, stylised map – showing the positions of the planets (a term that, in astrology, includes the Sun and Moon) in relation to each other and to Earth; at any given moment, the horoscope is exactly the same for everybody. And to say 'I'm a Libran' is to say no more than 'I was born between 24 September and 23 October'. Yet if you told your fellow guest at a party 'I was born on 10 October', it would sound rather ludicrous for him to reply 'Oh good, I was born on 15 February'; he is far more likely to say 'That means you're a Libran' in a significant tone, as if that implied a lot more.

People who understand astrology, and who take at least some part of it seriously, know that it is a subject far divorced from this popular mumbo-jumbo. They know that it is not a matter of 'What your stars foretell' – and, indeed, the stars themselves do not enter into any astrological calculations. Yet most criticisms by scientists against astrology are directed at just such misunderstandings – the former Astronomer Royal, Dr Harold Spencer Jones, could write, for instance: 'It is significant that I do not know



Above: 'Mars rules in Scorpio by day, and in Aries by night. He exerts his influence in all manly pursuits: fencing and athletics and the arts of war.' An illumination from the 15th-century treatise on astrology, *De Sphaera*

of any astrologer who is an observer of the stars, nor do I know of any serious observer of the stars who is an astrologer.' It seems, in fact, that most of those who dismiss astrology as pure superstition have never bothered to find out what it is and how it is practised. This dismissive attitude is as intellectually shortsighted as the gullible belief in 'Your Horoscope for Today'.

## A science for love and war

Astrology is one of the oldest of the sciences, and for more than 2000 years it was synonymous with astronomy. It was established in Babylonian times, flourished in Egypt, was practised by the Greeks and Romans, and kept alive – like most other sciences – by the Arabs. And as a science it was similarly studied in China, in India, and in central America.

The principle behind the practice of astrology is very pithily expressed in a phrase that was believed to have been coined by



Left: the great circular 'calendar stone' that once stood halfway up the pyramid of Tenochtitlan in Mexico. The two circular 'zodiacs' represent all the days of the Mayan year





Left: this wooden mummy-case, now in the British Museum, is from west Thebes and once held the body of Sheik Abdu'l-Qurna. It shows the goddess Nut surrounded by signs of the zodiac

Below: how the Sun appears to be in the different constellations of the zodiac. The Earth moves round the Sun, taking 12 months to complete its orbit; and, if it were possible to see the star background to the Sun during daylight, it would appear that the Sun was in a particular constellation throughout each month. It is easy to work out that the constellation due south at midnight is diametrically opposite to the constellation in which the Sun is to be found

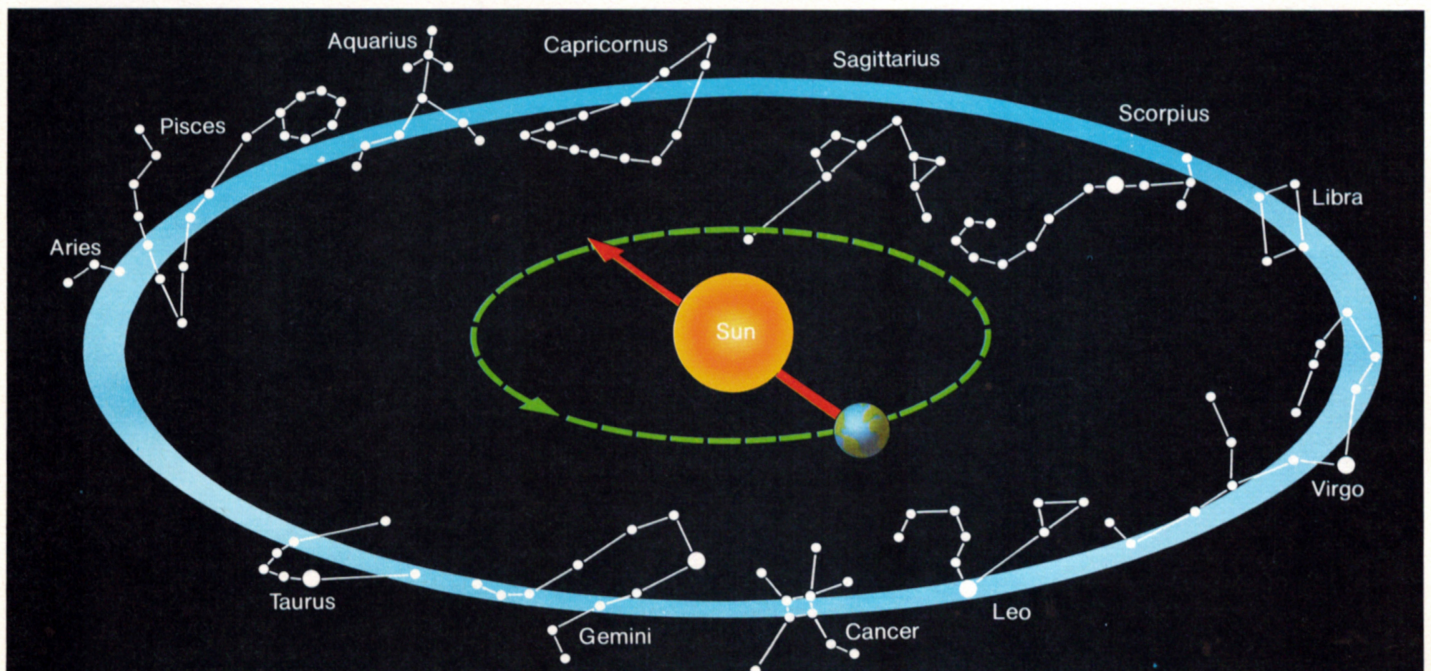
the Egyptian magician Hermes Trismegistos ('thrice-great Hermes'): 'As above, so below.' In other words, events on Earth reflect those in the heavens. The astrologers saw the planets – the word means 'wanderers' in Greek – moving purposefully or erratically against the background of the starry skies; and they supposed that the actions and experiences of these distant gods would be reflected in human affairs. When Mars, the god of war, burnt angrily in the night sky it was a time for quarrels and martial pursuits; when Venus glowed brightly as night fell, it was a time for love.

## Circle of animals

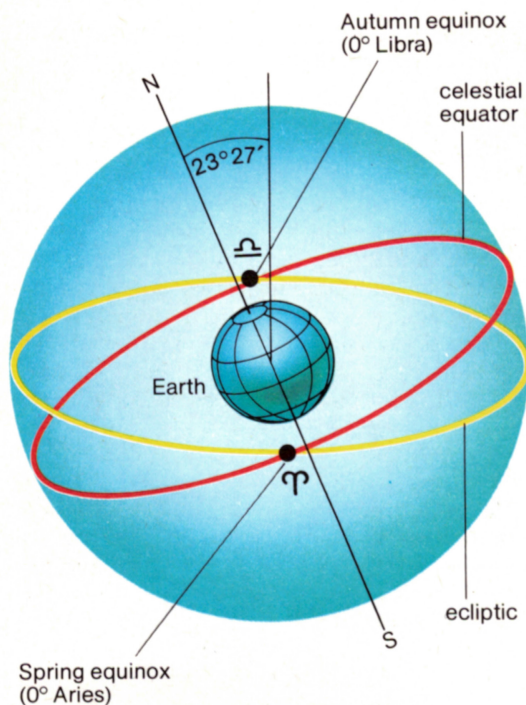
The astrologers soon observed that the planets stayed within quite a narrow band of the sky, never moving far away from the path of the Sun – the ecliptic. This band was marked by particular constellations and, since there were 12 months (moon cycles) in the year that it took the Sun to return to its original position, they identified 12 constellations as marking the months. At some time very early in the history of astrology in Babylonia, these constellations were given the names of mythic animals or persons, and the word zodiac means 'circle of animals' in Greek.

In fact, the 12 constellations do not divide the year equally between them, and few of them even vaguely resemble the animal they are named for. Worse than that: when we say (for instance) that Mars is in Aries – that is, apparently making a statement that Mars in the night sky can be seen against a background of the constellation Aries – this is just not true. Some 3000 to 4000 years ago, however, it was true.

As we now know, the Sun and the other planets do not move round the Earth; it is the Earth that moves, like the other planets,



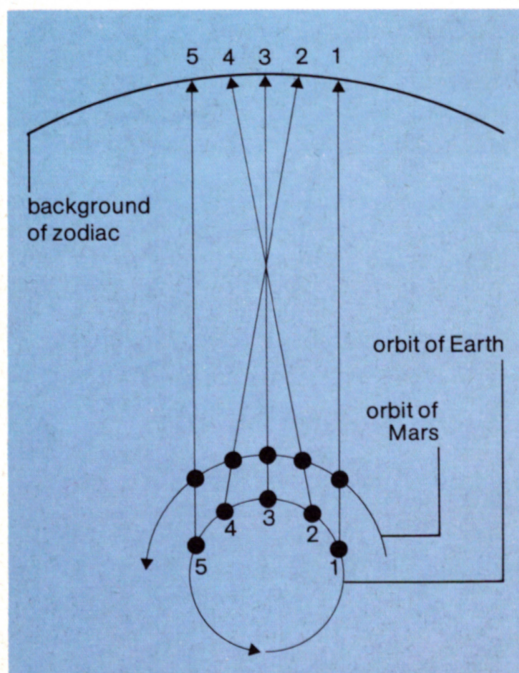




Left: in all simple astronomical and navigational calculations, the Earth is envisaged at the centre of the celestial sphere, which revolves along the line of the Earth's equator, while the apparent path of the Sun, the ecliptic, is at an angle to it. The equinoxes are the two points at which the ecliptic intersects with the celestial equator, and are defined as  $0^{\circ}$  Aries in spring, and  $0^{\circ}$  Libra in autumn

round the Sun, so that the Sun is against a different part of the background zodiac every day, and against a different constellation every month. In fact, of course, the Sun is so bright by day that we cannot see its star background; but during the night we can see the parts of the zodiac that are opposite the Sun by 12 hours, and so easily work out which constellation the Sun is 'in'.

However, the Earth, as it goes round the Sun, leans its axis of rotation by  $23^{\circ}27'$  to the side. When the northern pole is leaning toward the Sun it is summer in the northern hemisphere, and the days are long; in winter the northern pole is leaning away from the Sun, and days are short. There are only two days every year on which the 24 hours are



Right: a diagram of the phenomenon known as the precession of the equinoxes. The spring and autumn equinoxes are those two days in the year when day and night are of equal length; and because the Earth is slowly wobbling on its axis, the Sun appears in a different place in the zodiac each year at the equinox. About 4000 years ago the Sun was moving into Aries at the spring equinox (top); it gradually appeared to move backward through Aries, so that after about 2000 years it was at  $0^{\circ}$  Aries, and about to move into Pisces (middle). The position of the Sun at the spring equinox was then named  $0^{\circ}$  Aries, and this has defined the zodiac circle ever since. The equinox has now moved most of the way through Pisces, and within some 20 years will 'enter' Aquarius (bottom) – but the spring equinox will still be  $0^{\circ}$  Aries

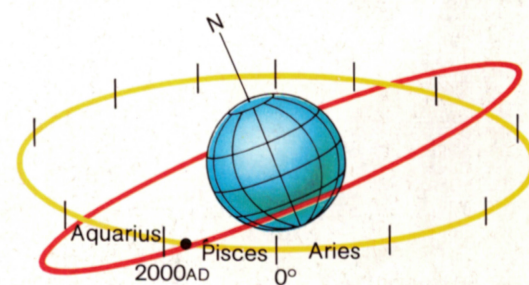
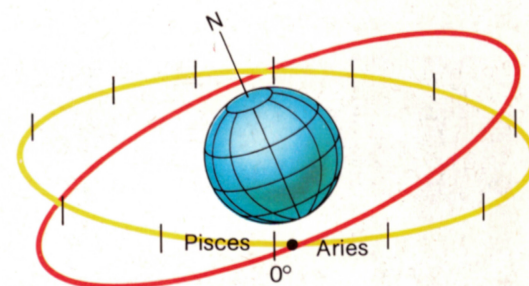
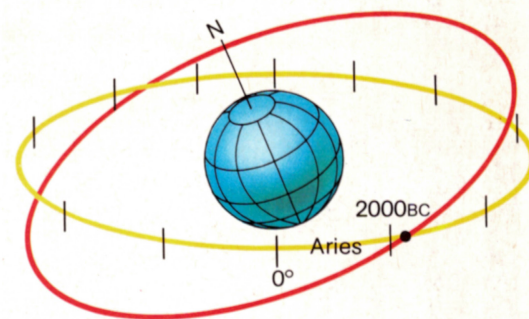
Left: the word planet means 'wanderer', and many of the planets appear to move erratically about the sky, sometimes apparently going back on their tracks for days or weeks. In the diagram, it is clear how Mars appears to move backward between positions 2 and 4

equally divided between night and day; these are the spring and autumn equinoxes, which occur usually on 20 or 21 March, and 22 or 23 September.

Four thousand years ago, when astrology was young, the Sun was in the constellation of Aries – or, more accurately, that twelfth of the zodiac in which Aries is situated – at the spring equinox. About 2000 years ago, the point on the zodiac circle marking the Sun's 'entering' at the spring equinox was therefore designated  $0^{\circ}$  Aries, the autumn equinox being  $0^{\circ}$  Libra.

### Night and day

But the Earth is not just leaning to one side as it circles the Sun; it is also wobbling very slowly like a spinning top that is beginning to slow down. As a result, the direction in which it leans gradually changes. This gives rise to a phenomenon known as the 'precession of the equinoxes', which was discovered by the Greek astronomer Hipparchus about 120 BC; the result of the wobbling is that the position of the spring equinox constantly moves: in





## Astrology

2000 years it moved right through 30° of Aries, and it is now most of the way through Pisces. As we near the end of the 20th century, the spring equinox is moving out of Pisces and into Aquarius. This is what is meant by 'the dawning of the Age of Aquarius'. In another 20,000 years the equinox will once more be at 0° Aries. But, for navigational, astronomical and astrological purposes, the spring equinox is always designated 0° Aries.

This, then, is one of the reasons why popular talk about 'sun signs' has so little significance. Three thousand years ago, when we said of somebody's birth that the Sun was in Scorpio, we meant just that; 1000 years ago it was in Libra; soon it will be in Virgo. But we still say of someone born in November that they are a Scorpion.

It is, in fact, the movements of the planets themselves that we are concerned with, not the star background against which they can be seen. They are like the many hands of a giant astronomical clock, and in recording their exact positions we are identifying a precise moment. This is what the horoscope does: it pinpoints the positions of the planets in the zodiac, as seen from Earth, and also their positions in relation to one another.

To the ancient astrologers the argument was transparently obvious. Since events in heaven were reflected by events on Earth, and since it was possible to predict the future positions of the gods (the planets) months or years in advance, then from knowledge of those positions it should be easy to predict events upon Earth.

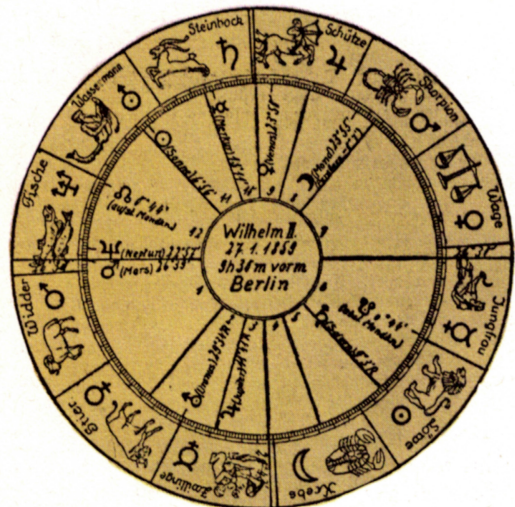
### Planets are not gods . . .

Modern critics of astrology, who know that the planets are not gods and that heavenly phenomena are not reflected in earthly happenings, find it easy to dismiss the whole matter. There is no way in which some remote pieces of rock (or balls of gas) can affect human nature and destiny, they claim. And they are perhaps right.

However, this argument does not rule out the possibility of prediction. Suppose you



Above: 'May', from the 15th-century codex *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*. The month, as the portion of the zodiac above the illustration shows, is divided between Taurus and Gemini



Left: a conventional horoscope drawn for Kaiser Wilhelm II. The horoscope is divided into 12 'houses' that do not correspond with the 12 signs of the zodiac; while the positions of the planets are indicated as degrees of angle within each zodiac division

receive a letter from your uncle, saying that he will be leaving his country home at about 10.15 a.m. and asking you to meet his train. A glance at the timetable will tell you that the only train he could possibly catch will arrive at the terminus at 1.05 p.m. An enquiry at the station will tell you that the train normally arrives at platform three. If you have a contact in the railway offices, you can probably discover the name of the driver of the train, the colour of the engine and its head code, and possibly all sorts of related facts.

If you take a friend with you to the station, you can tell him a surprising amount about future events. Pointing to the station clock, you tell him that when the two hands are together – in astrological terms this would be described as 'in conjunction' – a number of



things will happen: a blue engine (and you may even know its name and number), with the head code 06 and driven by a man named Harry Grimshaw, will arrive at platform three, and that a middle-aged man with glasses, walking with a stick, will get down from it. Your friend will be amazed: how could all these events have been caused by the influence of two hands on a clock?

The astrologer works with something very like a railway timetable. It is called an *ephemeris*, and it gives the positions of the various planets in the heavens at any particular time. Astronomers use very similar tables, and so do all sea and air navigators – in fact it is possible to draw up a horoscope perfectly satisfactorily from a 'nautical almanac'.

### Astronomical aspects

It has been objected that the discovery of the planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, which were unknown to the ancient astrologers, must have invalidated everything that went before. However these distant planets are relatively slow-moving, like hands on a clock that tell the century, the decade and the year. Uranus, for instance, remained in Libra from 1968 until December 1974; Neptune entered Sagittarius in 1970 and leaves it in 1984; Pluto takes from 1971 to 1983 to pass through Libra. So the 'influence' of these planets in the horoscope is equally slow-moving; of far greater significance to the modern astrologer is the relation of the position of one planet to another, something which is called its 'aspect'.

Astrological interpretation, in fact, falls into two distinct parts. First comes the drawing up of a horoscope. This need not be drawn up for the moment of a person's birth; it can just as well be for an event like a wedding or the issue of some new company stock. However, the Moon and Mercury move very rapidly through the horoscope, resulting in quickly changing aspects, and so the moment for which the horoscope is drawn should be defined as accurately as possible. It is mainly for this reason that the





**Tom Lethbridge is a major figure in the world of the paranormal, but, as COLIN WILSON explains, he took many years of painstaking academic and practical research to reach his important conclusions**

NO ONE WHO IS interested in the paranormal can afford to ignore Tom Lethbridge, yet when he died in a nursing home in Devon in 1971, his name was hardly known to the general public. Today, many of his admirers believe that he is the single most important name in the history of psychical research. His ideas on dowsing, life after death, ghosts, poltergeists, magic, second-sight, precognition, the nature of time, cover a wider field than those of any other psychical researcher. Moreover, they fit together into the most exciting and comprehensive theory of the 'occult' ever advanced.

These ideas were expressed in a series of small books published in the last 10 years of his life. The odd thing is that Lethbridge took no interest in psychic matters until he retired to Devon in his mid fifties. He was trained as an archaeologist and a historian, and spent most of his adult life in Cambridge as the Keeper of Anglo-Saxon Antiquities at the University Museum. But even in that respectable setting he was a maverick, and in 1957 he left Cambridge in disgust at the



Above: Tom and Mina Lethbridge were keen – and accomplished – dowsers

Below: Ladram Bay, Devon, where people felt a strong urge to jump off the cliffs

hostile reception of one of his books on archaeology. Together with his wife Mina, he moved into Hole House, an old Tudor mansion on the south coast of Devon. He meant to spend his retirement reading and digging for bits of broken pottery. In fact, the most amazing period of his eventful life was about to begin.

The person who was most responsible for this change of direction was an old 'witch' who lived next door. This white haired little old lady assured Lethbridge that she could put mild spells on people who annoyed her, and that she was able to leave her body at night and wander around the district – an ability known as 'astral projection'. Lethbridge was naturally sceptical – until something convinced him.

The witch explained to him one day how she managed to put off unwanted visitors. What she did was to draw a five pointed star – a pentagram – in her head, and then visualise it across the path of the unwanted visitor – for example, on the front gate.

Shortly afterwards, Tom was lying in bed, idly drawing pentagrams in his head, and imagining them around their beds. In the middle of the night, Mina woke up with a creepy feeling that there was somebody else in the room. At the foot of the bed, she could see a faint glow of light, which slowly faded

## A seeker after truth





as she watched it. The next day, the witch came to see them. When she told them that she had 'visited' their bedroom on the previous night, and found the beds surrounded by triangles of fire, Tom's scepticism began to evaporate. Mina politely requested the old witch to stay out of their bedroom at night.

Three years later, the old lady died in peculiar circumstances. She was quarrelling with a neighbouring farmer, and told Lethbridge that she intended to put a spell on the man's cattle. By this time, Lethbridge knew enough about the 'occult' to take her seriously, and he warned her about the dangers of black magic – how it could rebound on to the witch. But the old lady ignored his advice. One morning, she was found dead in her bed in circumstances that made the police suspect murder. And the cattle of two nearby farms suddenly got foot and mouth disease. However, the farmer she wanted to 'ill wish' remained unaffected. Lethbridge was convinced that the spell had gone wrong and 'bounced back'.

### The invisible world

But the old lady's death resulted – indirectly – in one of his most important insights. Passing the witch's cottage, he experienced a 'nasty feeling', a suffocating sense of depression. With a scientist's curiosity, he walked around the cottage, and noticed an interesting thing. He could step *into* the depression and then out of it again, just as if it was some kind of invisible wall.

The depression reminded Lethbridge of something that had happened when he was a teenager. He and his mother had gone for a walk in the Great Wood near Wokingham. It was a lovely morning; yet quite suddenly, both of them experienced 'a horrible feeling of gloom and depression, which crept upon us like a blanket of fog over the surface of the sea'. They hurried away, agreeing that it was something terrible and inexplicable. A few days later, the corpse of a suicide was found a few yards from the spot where they had been standing, hidden by some bushes.

About a year after the death of the witch, another strange experience gave Tom the clue he was looking for. On a damp January afternoon, he and Mina drove down to Ladram Bay to collect seaweed for her garden. As Lethbridge stepped on to the beach, he once again experienced the feeling of gloom and fear, like a blanket of fog descending upon him. Mina wandered off along the beach while Tom filled the sacks with seaweed. Suddenly she came hurrying back, saying: 'Let's go. I can't stand this place a minute longer. There's something frightful here.'

The next day, they mentioned what had happened to Mina's brother. He said he also had experienced the same kind of thing in a field near Avebury, in Wiltshire. The word 'field' made something connect in Tom's brain – he remembered that field telephones



Above: Hole Mill and Hole House in Devon. Hole Mill was the home of Lethbridge's neighbour, a 'witch' or 'wise woman' whose strange powers convinced Lethbridge that the world of the paranormal was worth investigating. Hole House became the Lethbridges' home after Tom left Cambridge in disgust at the reception of one of his books. Here he was to develop his theories on psychic phenomena until his death in 1971

often short-circuit in warm, muggy weather. 'What was the weather like?' he asked. 'Warm and damp,' said the brother.

An idea was taking shape. *Water* . . . could that be the key? It had been warm and damp in the Great Wood. It had been warm and damp on Ladram beach. The following weekend, they set out for Ladram Bay a second time. Again, as they stepped on to the beach, both walked into the same bank of depression – or 'ghoul' as Lethbridge called it. Mina led Tom to the far end of the beach, to the place she had been sitting when she had been overwhelmed by the strange feeling. Here it was so strong that it made them feel giddy – Lethbridge described it as the feeling you get when you have a high temperature and are full of drugs. On either side of them were two small streams.

Mina wandered off to look at the scenery from the top of the cliff. Suddenly, she walked into the depression again. Moreover, she had an odd feeling, as if someone – or something – was urging her to jump over. She went and fetched Tom, who agreed that the spot was just as sinister as the place down on the seashore below.

Now he needed only one more piece of the jigsaw puzzle, and he found it – but only years later. Nine years after the first known experiences of depression were felt on those cliffs a man did commit suicide there. Lethbridge wondered whether the 'ghoul' was a feeling so intense that it had become timeless and imprinted itself on the area, casting its baleful shadow on those who stood there.

Whether from the past or from the future the feelings of despair were 'recorded' on the surroundings – but how?

The key, Lethbridge believed, was water. As an archaeologist, he had always been mildly interested in dowsing and water-divining. The dowser walks along with a forked hazel twig held in his hands, and when he stands above running water, the muscles in his hands and arms convulse and the twig



bends either up or down. How does it work? Professor Y. Rocard of the Sorbonne discovered that underground water produces changes in the earth's magnetic field, and this is what the dowser's muscles respond to. The water does this because it has a field of its own, which interacts with the earth's field.

Significantly, magnetic fields are the means by which sound is recorded on tape covered with iron oxide. Suppose the magnetic field of running water can also record strong emotions – which, after all, are basically electrical activities in the human brain and body? Such fields could well be strongest in damp and muggy weather.

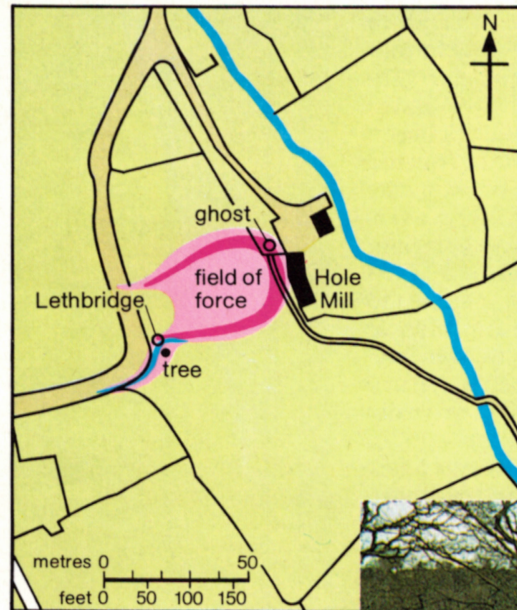
### Magnetic emotions

This would also explain why the banks of depression seem to form a kind of invisible wall. Anyone who has ever tried bringing a magnet closer and closer to an iron nail will know that the nail is suddenly 'seized' by the magnet as it enters the force field. Presumably the magnetic field of water has the same property. And if it can 'tape record' powerful emotions, then you would feel them quite suddenly, as you stepped into the field. Both Tom and Mina noticed that the ghoul on Ladram beach came to an end quite abruptly

And what about 'ghosts' – that is, things actually seen, rather than just sensed? Here again, Lethbridge was convinced that his electrical theory fitted the facts. In 1922 – when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge – he had seen a ghost in the rooms of a friend. He was just about to leave, late at night, when the door opened and a man wearing a top hat came in. Assuming he was a college porter who had come to give his friend a message, Lethbridge said goodnight, and went out. The man did not reply. The next morning, Lethbridge saw his friend, and asked casually about the identity of the man in the top hat. His friend flatly denied that anyone had come in. And when Lethbridge brooded on it, he realised that the man had not worn a porter's uniform. He wore hunting kit. Then why had he not recognised the red coat? Because it wasn't red; it was grey – a dull grey, like a black and white *photograph*. Lethbridge realised that he had seen a ghost. Moreover, his friend's rooms overlooked the river, so there was a damp atmosphere.

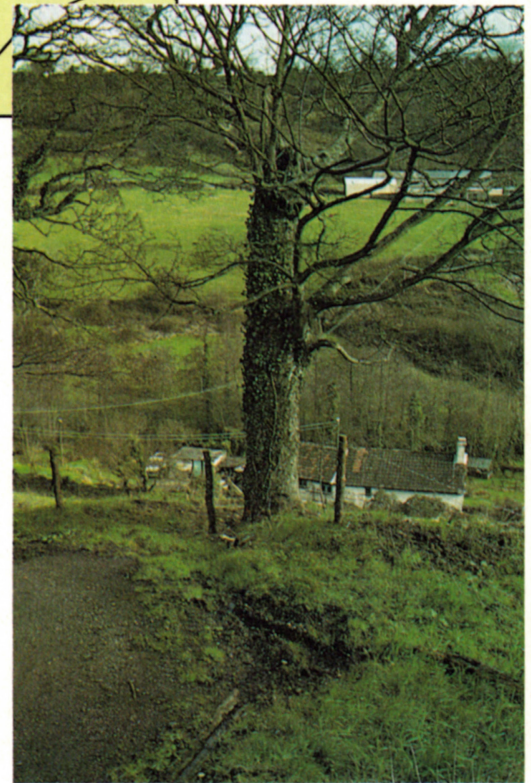
Tom had seen a ghost in the witch's garden, in the year before she died. He had been sitting on the hillside, looking down at the witch's house, when he noticed two women in the yard. One was the witch; the other was a tall old lady dressed in rather old-fashioned grey clothes. Later, he saw the witch and asked her about her visitor. The witch looked puzzled; then, when Lethbridge described the figure, said, 'Ah, you've seen my ghost.'

This happened in 1959, before Lethbridge had his important insight on Ladram beach. So it never entered his head that the ghost was a 'tape recording'. His first



Left: map showing the position of the ghost at Hole Mill in relation to the underground stream and its field of force. Lethbridge plotted the area 'blind' with his hazel twig. Later excavation showed this plot to be correct in every detail

Right: the 'witch's' house, Hole Mill, as seen from Hole House. This was the spot where Lethbridge saw the ghost of an old lady and experienced a curious tingling sensation when he stood over an underground stream. He later discovered that the two experiences were connected



Below: the Reverend Bishop Leonidas Polk, who intrigued Professor Joseph Buchanan in the 1840s by being able to detect brass in the dark simply by touching it with his fingers



thought was that the old lady in grey might be some kind of thought projection – in other words, a kind of television picture, caused by someone else *thinking* about the ghost, and somehow transferring the thought into his own mind. Then it struck him that ghosts are supposed to reappear on anniversaries. So he and Mina decided they would go to the same spot at the same time the following year, and see what happened.

In fact, nothing happened. They stood quietly at the same spot, on a fine, warm morning, but the old lady failed to reappear. However, both of them noticed a kind of electrical tingling feeling in the atmosphere. There was a tiny underground stream running down the lane – under a drain cover – and they felt the tingling most strongly when they stood on top of it. Tom would only realise the significance of that tingling feeling after his experience on Ladram beach. And



then he decided to explore the stream and see where it led. The result confirmed his suspicions. The stream turned at right angles quite close to the witch's house. And it was directly above this stream that he had seen the old lady in grey. He had been connected to the spot by the magnetic field of the flowing water. But the witch, standing a few yards away from the underground stream, had seen nothing.

So Lethbridge had been quite mistaken to believe that his 'old lady' was some kind of television picture projected by someone else's mind, or a ghost that would return exactly a year later. It was almost certainly just another 'tape recording' – a kind of videotape recording this time – but in black and white, just like the huntsman he had seen in his friend's rooms at Cambridge.

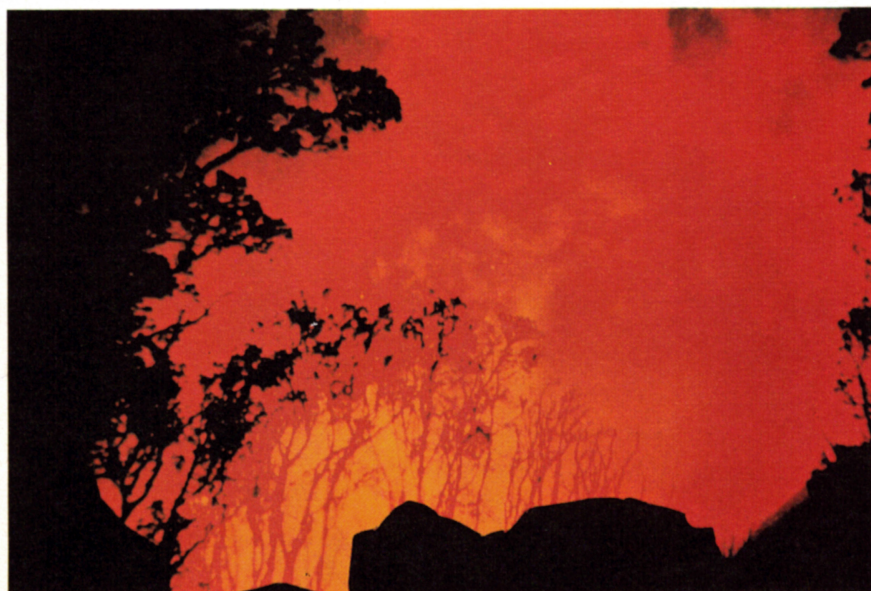
It would be very satisfying to be able to add that he decided to investigate the apparitions, and found that a huntsman had died of apoplexy in the room in Cambridge, or that the old lady had drowned in the underground stream. No such neat, satisfactory solutions can be provided. And neither is it necessary. The huntsman had probably been a previous inhabitant of the rooms; the old lady had probably lived most of her life in Hole Mill – the witch's house. (From her clothes, Lethbridge thought she dated back to before the First World War.) But there is no earthly reason why the 'force field' of water should record only unpleasant emotions. The old lady might have been unusually happy or excited when she was 'photographed' on the field. Or perhaps she passed over the spot so often that her image finally became indelibly imprinted there.

How much evidence is there for the Lethbridge theory of ghosts and ghouls? Well, to begin with, it is worth noting that his 'tape recording' theory was by no means new. In America in the 1840s, a professor named Joseph Rodes Buchanan was intrigued when a certain Bishop Polk told him that he could



A diagram showing the 'psyche-field' around a tree, plotted with a hazel twig. The shaded area shows the limits of the force field that can be 'picked up' by a dowser

A Hawaiian volcano erupting. In the mid 19th century William Denton gave a piece of volcanic rock to a sensitive who 'saw' a volcano exploding. This was one of the first serious experiments into psychometry – or object reading – and its results had far-reaching implications for dowsing



detect brass in the dark by touching it with his fingers; it produced an unpleasant taste in his mouth. Buchanan tested him and found it was true. He discovered that certain of his students also had the same curious ability. In fact, some of them could even detect different substances when they were wrapped up in brown paper. Buchanan decided that the nerves produce some kind of force field – he called it the 'nerve aura' – which streams out of the finger ends, and which operates like an extra sense.

### A strange talent

What really puzzled him was that some of his sensitives could hold a sealed letter, and describe the person who had written it, and whether the writer was sad or happy at the time. Buchanan explained this by suggesting that all substances give off emanations (another name for a force field) on which human emotions can be recorded. He had stumbled on Lethbridge's theory just about 100 years before Lethbridge.

Buchanan's friend William Denton, a professor of geology, took the theory even further. He tried wrapping a piece of Hawaiian volcanic rock in paper and handing it to a sensitive, who immediately saw in his mind an island in the midst of blue seas, and an exploding volcano. When handed a pebble of glacial limestone, the sensitive saw it frozen in deep ice. A fragment of meteor produced a picture of the depths of space, with glittering stars. Denton was so excited by all this that he believed he had discovered a new – or forgotten – human faculty, and that one day we shall be able to look back into the past just as easily as we can now look at the stars (which may have died millions of years ago) through a telescope.

Buchanan and Denton called this strange faculty *psychometry*, and for a few years it caused considerable excitement in the scientific world. Then, with the coming of Darwin, T.H. Huxley and the rest, a more sceptical climate prevailed, and it was forgotten. Even so, Sir Oliver Lodge, the notable scientist who dared to be interested in psychical research, wrote in 1908:

Take, for example, a haunted house . . . wherein some one room is the scene of a ghostly representation of some long past tragedy. On a psychometric hypothesis, the original tragedy has been literally *photographed* on its material surroundings, nay, even on the ether itself, by reason of the intensity of emotion felt by those who enacted it.

It may seem, then, that Lethbridge's discovery was not so remarkable after all. That would be a mistake. For it was only a part of a far more comprehensive and more important theory of the paranormal.

*How can a dowser's pendulum react to anger, sex or the afterlife? See page 614*



# Stalking the Surrey puma

**Surrey is one of the most English of counties, a patchwork of commuter towns and rich, rolling countryside. Yet in the 1960s, as CHRIS HALL recounts, a wild, American 'big cat' frightened people and attacked farm animals there**

ERNEST JELLETT WILL NEVER forget one Monday morning in 1962. His work for the Mid Wessex Water Board took him to inspect Heathy Park Reservoir, in the North Downs near Farnham, Surrey, early on the morning of 16 July. It is reached by a long track through dense woodland. As a countryman, Mr Jellett is very familiar with the local wildlife – so it was not the rabbit beside the track that surprised him but the big cat-like animal stalking it.

Before he had had time to take this in, things began to happen rather quickly. The rabbit sensed him and fled towards the 'cat', which pounced but missed. Both animals ran up the track towards Mr Jellett. The rabbit made off into the undergrowth, but the other animal bounded straight at him. Having no weapon, he shouted loudly, and fortunately frightened it off.

He later described what he had seen as sandy coloured and resembling a small lion. 'It had a sort of round, flat face, like a big cat, and its tail was long and thin, not bushy. It had big paws.' He was sure it was not a fox.

Later, police searched the area, but found only flattened bracken where 'a good sized animal' had rested. A few days later cattle on a nearby farm were unusually restless,

Bottom: did the lush woods and farmland of Surrey conceal a mysterious big cat during the 1960s?

Something resembling a puma (inset) was often seen – but never caught – and such an animal could easily have adapted to the local climate and terrain

Below: Mr A. Burningham, who saw 'an enormous great cat' in late August 1959 while driving past Godsfield Copse, south of Preston Candover. The creature had a cat-like head, mangy looking coat, pointed ears and a tail that curled up – and was, perhaps, a puma



milling about in their field until midnight, as if something unfamiliar were about. Then a woman walking near the village of Crondall saw an animal in a field that she later – having consulted a wildlife book – thought might be a jaguarundi, a South American member of the cat family.

And so began a legend that, after infrequent and isolated reports over the next two years, was to grow to a scale comparable with the Loch Ness monster: the legend of the Surrey puma.

The first account of a strange cat-like animal in Surrey seems to be that recorded by William Cobbett in his *Rural rides*. He recalled seeing it in a tree near Waverley Abbey in his childhood, which would date it around 1770. However, the description he gives could be of a wild cat; these were known in Surrey until at least the 1920s.

New research has revealed several reports from the 1950s that may be related to the puma saga. The most detailed of these occurred at harvest time in 1959, near Preston Candover, 5 miles (8 kilometres) north-east of Winchester.

Another local man, Mr A. Burningham, was driving along a country road in the early evening when 'an enormous great cat' crossed the lane about 40 yards (40 metres) ahead of him. It was the size of a labrador dog, but its head and walk were distinctly feline. He stopped his car and saw the animal, screened by trees, watching lambs in a field, but did not think it wise to leave his





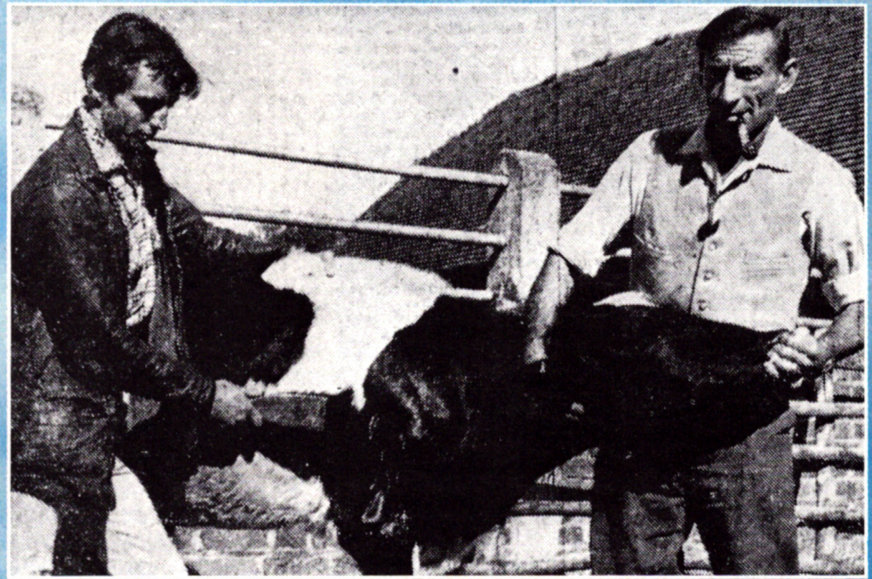
car for a closer look. He was unable to make anything of what he had seen until he noticed the report of Mr Jellett's experience in a local newspaper.

But it was in 1964 that things really began to happen. During the summer, strange cat-like animals were seen around Farnham and near Bordon. A frightful howling kept people awake, likened by one to 'the sound of a hundred cats being murdered.' Then, almost simultaneously, two events brought the mystery to the nation's attention.

Farmer Edward Blanks was manager of Bushylease Farm in Crondall, near Farnham. For two years he had been seeing and hearing a strange cat-like creature that all his countryman's knowledge could not identify. Then in August 1964, a herd of cattle broke out of their field – which they would not have done unless alarmed. One of them was later found bitten and mauled in nearby woods. A vet who examined it was of the opinion that the injuries were not caused by 'any animal found in this country' – though not everyone agreed, and some tried to play down the whole affair.

All the same, by the end of August the hunt was on for the 'Crondall cougar', with Bushylease Farm as hunt headquarters and armed farmers patrolling the woods. They were joined by Billy Davidson, a Canadian ranger with experience of puma tracking who was on holiday in Britain. He did not catch the Surrey puma, but he did find 'definite evidence' of a big cat, including a lair.

In early September there were so many sightings that a mass break-out from a zoo seemed the most likely explanation. A puma was seen at Crondall, and on Farnham Common, and the howling continued. The next

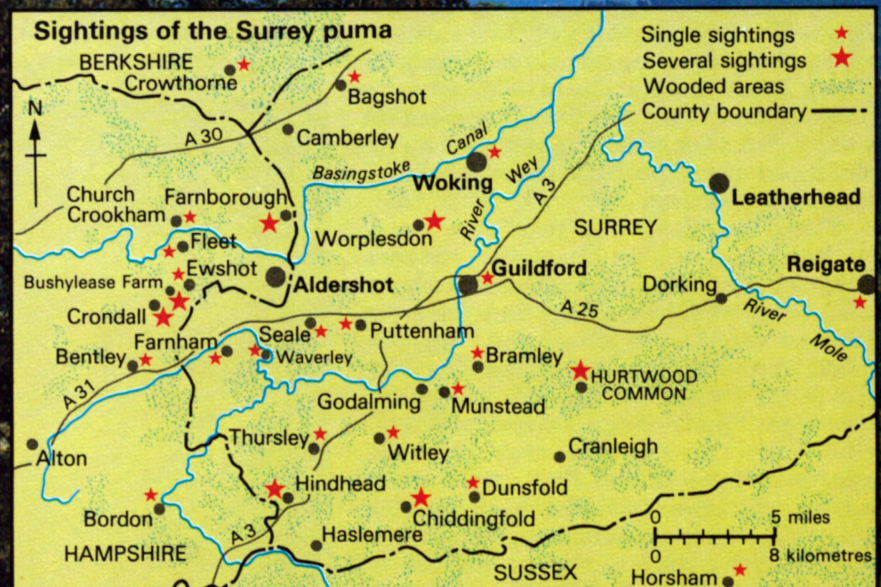


Above: Mr Edward Blanks and his son (left) with a steer apparently mauled by the puma in August 1964. Mr Blanks says the puma was in the area for six or seven years between 1962 and 1969, returning to his farm during March each year. The family got used to it, though it had 'an awful stench'. The big cat seems to have been little trouble, killing only what it needed to survive – and the steer soon recovered

sighting was made by George Wisdom, who had decided to spend his lunch hour gathering blackberries on Munstead Heath, near Godalming. He did not pick many. Whatever it was that snarled at him from the bushes had no wish for his company.

He gave one of the best descriptions of a puma of the whole affair, which is interesting because at this point puma descriptions had not been publicised. Three days later a half-mile (800-metre) trail of footprints appeared overnight in freshly raked sand used for practice gallops by nearby riding stables. Each was 6 inches (15 centimetres) across, and they were identified as possible puma prints by experts at London Zoo.

The many footprints that have been found after sightings of the 'puma' would seem to





## The Surrey puma

offer the best hope of evidence for positive identification of the creature. But in fact most of them turn out to have been made by dogs or foxes, and others are too indistinct to be of any help at all. Only two were pronounced puma by the experts: a single print from Hurtwood Common – and the Munstead trail.

Most experts agreed the Munstead prints were of a large cat, probably puma. But naturalist Dr Maurice Burton, who lived nearby and was closely involved in (and sceptical of) the puma affair, found that large dogs could leave similar prints in some circumstances. A St Bernard was missing in the area on the night the footprints appeared, and bloodhounds were kept near the stables.

It is true that some people have claimed that the Munstead print looks more like that of a bloodhound than a puma; but if it was a dog that snarled at Mr Wisdom from the blackberry bushes, it was a very strange dog indeed. He visited a zoo shortly afterwards, and found an identical 'dog' on show. It was in an enclosure marked 'puma'.

After Mr Wisdom's spectacular sighting, the puma became weekly news. A special cage was kept at Godalming police station where an emergency plan to capture the beast, called the 'Munstead monster', was prepared. The public were asked to notify the police promptly, and local papers kept everyone informed. Zoo and RSPCA experts were at hand.

A log of all reports investigated, including unusual attacks on farm animals, was kept by police. When it was finally closed in 1968, it had 362 entries, but there were many more that were either not reported, or that the police for various reasons were unable to investigate.

### On safari in Surrey

The most determined efforts to catch the puma took place in 1966, and quite a few serious and not-so-serious 'safaris' were made into the wilds of Surrey in the mid 1960s. These projects ranged from teams of experienced big-game hunters to a local pub selling 'game permits' to would-be puma hunters, with proceeds being donated to charity. But all, whether naturalists or youth clubs, had one thing in common: they failed to find their quarry.

Then, in 1968, it all ended. To this day local lore says that the puma was shot by a farmer, but there is no agreement on where, what became of the body, or why the event received no publicity at the time.

Whatever the truth, the legend lives on, still widely remembered; people still believe they saw the puma. And from time to time its ghost still walks: a few big cats are reported every year in south-east England – for instance, one near Guildford in September 1980, and another at Hastings in December of the same year.

So much at least is legend, but could there

Mr George Wisdom was picking blackberries from these bushes one day in September 1964 when something large and feline snarled at him from amid the foliage. Three days later strange animal footprints appeared nearby – one of only two sets pronounced by experts to be authentic puma tracks



Below: police took this plaster cast of 'puma' footprints from tracks at Bramley Golf Club in 1969



really have been a puma in Surrey? And could it have survived to the present day? Well, it might be improbable, but is not impossible. The climate is milder than much of the puma's natural American habitat. There is no shortage of food: a puma could live on the equivalent of 10 rabbits a day, and the region has tens of thousands of them. Surrey is England's most wooded county; its heaths can be very lonely places where a largely nocturnal animal could roam for weeks unseen.

But where might the puma have come from? In 1964 there were officially just 23 pumas in Britain, all securely behind bars. If it existed, the Surrey puma must have been imported illegally; then it either escaped, or was deliberately freed. If this is correct, it was probably smuggled in as a cub, possibly around 1958.

To support this theory four early sightings were of small big cats, described as 'young puma' in August 1959, 'small lion'

and 'jaguarundi' in July 1962, and 'lynx' in January 1963 – but we are left with a 'huge lion' near Fleet in 1959. At a puma exhibition at the Guildford Show in 1966, a young boy was overheard to say he knew a family who had released three puma cubs. Perhaps inevitably he vanished, leaving his story unconfirmed. If it was not a hoax, it would explain everything – but as such proof is lacking, our enquiry must depend on more controversial evidence.

The puma, also known as the cougar or mountain lion, is a shy, mainly nocturnal animal, native to the Americas. It is very adaptable to terrain, being at home in forest or mountains. A full-grown puma would be about 5 feet (1.5 metres) long and 3 feet (0.9 metres) high. Its colour is normally sandy to ginger.

There is no shortage of its alleged sightings, but comparison of their details with the descriptions of a puma is not very encouraging. A shy nocturnal animal should



not be seen so often in or near towns in broad daylight. The reported animals are usually too small. Only in colour do we find reasonable agreement, but a number of the creatures are described as black. Black pumas are very rare, and to accept these reports is to accept a double improbability: that there are two pumas in Surrey, one of them a rare type – or that there are both a puma and a panther.

Yet a lot of people saw something that they could not identify. Unfortunately, many of the vague descriptions could just as well fit domestic cats or dogs, foxes or deer. Some sightings are very definitely *not* puma.

Others are at considerable distance, very brief, or brief and at night. A significant number are by townspeople, who have little need to know the wildlife in the way a farmer does, and usually take little real notice of it until puma stories appear all over the local paper. It is then a small step to glimpsing next door's ginger tom one night and creating another puma report. Sadly, over three-quarters of the reports must be regarded as suspect.

#### A camera shy cat

Photographs could solve this problem, but there are few in existence. One, said to show the puma in a garden in Farnham in 1966, cannot be traced. Those taken on a misty autumn morning at Reigate in 1977 are indistinct. The photograph taken at Worplesdon in August 1966 by two ex-police photographers looks suspiciously like a large domestic cat, although one zoologist said its size was like that of a female puma.

To find an animal killed in a way typical of big cats would be good supporting evidence. Pumas generally bring their prey to the ground by hurling themselves against it, and then attack the throat and breast. Some writers on the puma mystery have tended to

Though the Surrey puma saga reached its height in the mid 1960s – and the animal itself was reputedly shot in 1968 – large cat-like animals are still seen in the area and unusual tracks still found. Here 17-year-old Gwen Fraser of Farnborough prepares to measure footprints found in her garden in December 1970



point to *all* the attacks on farm animals in the region at the time as suggesting puma, an approach that draws justified criticism from sceptics. There are 6000 attacks on farmstock each year, mostly the work of dogs. A dog can inflict terrible injuries, even tearing off whole limbs.

In one case a deer found at Cranleigh could have been killed by a puma. A number of other reports checked by Ministry of Agriculture experts involved injuries 'outside the previous experience' of the officers.

But what of the frightful howling? It could have been made by foxes, badgers or even owls. All the recordings made were identified as fox calls: mating vixen can make perhaps the most terrifying sound of all British wildlife. That leaves us with the sounds reported by farmers – who know the sounds of the countryside – that they had not heard anything like before.

So far we have assumed that either there was no puma at all, or that an ordinary flesh-and-blood puma was loose. Other theories have been put forward to explain how an animal that, by all the rules, should not be there was reported so often.

Some people have claimed that UFOs may be in some way responsible; many have been seen over Surrey, some in places where the puma has also been seen, but many more do not tie into the pattern so conveniently. Timeslips, thought-forms and Bermuda triangle-like vortices have all been suggested. Or is the Surrey puma somehow connected with leys? In 1973 a survey of sightings of mystery cats around Bournemouth showed them all to lie close to leys.

It cannot now be conclusively proven that a puma once prowled the Surrey hills. But it does seem very likely that, at least in the mid 1960s, one did, with remarkably little risk to either human life or farm economy. And it will live on, a blend of reality and imagination, in the folklore of our land.



Photographs of the Surrey puma are few and far between, and none of those available are satisfactory. This, taken at Worplesdon in 1966, is supposed to be of the big cat but bears a rather stronger resemblance to a small one of the domestic variety

#### Further reading

Janet and Colin Bord, *Alien animals*, Paul Elek 1980  
John Michell and Robert J. M. Rickard, *Phenomena: a book of wonders*, Thames and Hudson 1977



# Understanding ghosts

**The troubled spirits of the dead, phantom animals, spectral coaches – all these have been called ‘ghosts’. But are they all the same? FRANK SMYTH considers what various hauntings have in common – and how they differ**

THE PERENNIAL QUESTION as to whether ghosts exist must, in view of various surveys carried out by such bodies as the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) over the last 100 years or so, be answered in the affirmative. To reject the testimony of the many hundreds of respectable people who claim to have experienced apparitions as wishful thinking, self-delusion or downright lying would be sheer wilfulness.

The question facing modern parapsychologists and psychophysical researchers is: *how* do ghosts exist? Are they revenant spirits? Are they the result of telepathy? Are they produced by mass hallucination or self-hypnosis? Advances in psychology over the last few decades have brought us nearer to understanding some aspects of apparitions, but the definitive truth still eludes us.

The most common form of ‘ghost’ appears to be the ‘crisis apparition’, which occurs when a person under great stress – sometimes on the point of death – appears to someone close to them as a ‘vision’ or, occasionally, as a disembodied voice.

The majority of crisis apparition cases have tragic overtones. For instance, soldiers have appeared to their mothers or wives at the exact time of their own deaths on far-away battlefields. But not all do so.

Victoria Branden, in her book *Understanding ghosts*, quotes the case of a friend who

This photograph of the library at Combermere Hall in Cheshire was taken on 5 December 1891 by Sybil Corbet, who had been staying at the house. When she developed the plate, she was startled to see the shape of an elderly gentleman sitting in a chair on the left of the picture. The figure was later identified as that of Lord Combermere himself: but at the time the photograph was taken, he was being buried a few miles away

was evacuated from England to Canada during the Second World War because of a health problem, leaving her husband behind in the Services. One evening, the children were busy with their homework, while their mother was ironing in what she admitted to Mrs Branden was ‘a rather dreamlike state’.

Suddenly she saw the door of the room open, and her uniformed husband came in. Before she could recover from her astonishment, he vanished. She put down the iron and sat, near to fainting, in a chair. The children clustered around her anxiously and when she told them what had happened they said that they had not seen anything and the door certainly had not opened. The mother and the elder child had, however, read of crisis apparitions and became convinced that the vision meant that the husband had been killed or injured. They made a note of the time and circumstances, but agonisingly, that was all they could do.

Some days later, to what must have been their enormous relief, news came: the husband had been unexpectedly chosen to go on a training programme to Canada, at a camp very near to his family. This meant, of course, that he could live with them while abroad. When the couple were finally reunited the husband said that the news had come as a happy shock. He could not remember consciously ‘projecting’ any thought to his wife, but they worked out that he had probably opened his commanding officer’s door after hearing the news at about the same time as the wife had ‘seen’ her door open.

An interesting point about this incident is that the wife was ‘rather dreamlike’ at the time, with her mind in an open and receptive state. The children, who saw nothing, were concentrating hard on their homework.

Exactly how telepathic information is communicated remains a mystery, particularly so in the case where an apparition





appears solid and living. However, scientists point out that perception is a much more complex business than at first appears: vivid dreams, for instance, often appear perfectly solid and physical, and in such cases the percipient is not receiving information through his eyes. A hypnotist may tell a subject that when he or she awakes only the hypnotist will be in the room – even though other people may be present. When the subject comes around he will not see the others present until the hypnotist removes the suggestion. Something like this may happen in cases of telepathy, although it seems remarkable that the agent – or person ‘sending’ the hallucination – can achieve at a distance, and in many cases while he is unconscious, what the hypnotist can only manage by giving specific instructions.

Evidence points to the fact that the agent’s mind plays a smaller part in crisis apparitions than does that of the percipient. If we look at recorded cases it becomes apparent that the agent rarely appears as he is at the moment of ‘transmission’ – the percipient does not see a mangled body in a motor car, or a dying wounded soldier in a trench, but what appears to be a normal image of the agent that, moreover, relates to the percipient’s surroundings.

This point is stressed by G. N. M. Tyrrell in his book *Apparitions*. He points out that apparitions in crisis cases have been guilty of such unghostlike phenomena as casting shadows or appearing reflected in a mirror.

[They] adapt themselves almost miraculously to the physical conditions of the percipient’s surroundings, of which the agent as a rule can know little or nothing. These facts reveal the apparition to be a piece of stage machinery which the percipient must have a large hand in creating and some of the details

Below: cases of crisis apparitions are most common in times of war, when a mother may see her son at the moment of his death on a battlefield. It seems that the shock of death causes some kind of telepathic communication between son and mother. But rarely does the mother have a vision of a dying soldier; in most cases she sees her son as he appeared in normal, everyday life



Left: when Mr Bootman, a bank manager pursuing his hobby of photographing church architecture, took this picture at Eastry, Kent, in 1956, his wife and a cleaning woman were the only other people present. But the ghostly form of a vicar somehow appeared on the film. Some years later Mr Bootman showed the photograph to a Women’s Institute group and was told that a similar phantom had been seen in the same church in the 1940s. This may well be an example of what is called a ‘place-centred’ ghost: the vicar’s strong attachment to the church could have led to a ‘record’ of his image being imprinted upon it



for which he must supply – that is to say, an apparition cannot be merely a direct expression of the agent’s *idea*; it must be a drama worked out with that idea as its *motif*.

But telepathy can only partly explain cases of collective apparitions, where a group of people witness the same thing. And it is hard to see how it could play any part in the case of, for instance, the phantom London Transport bus (see page 550) for by definition the telepathic agent must be a sentient being. One of the most famous cases of a collective apparition was reported to the SPR in the late 19th century by Charles Lett, the son-in-law of a Captain Towns of Sydney. One day at about 9 p.m. some six weeks after the Captain’s death, his daughter, Mrs Lett, and a Miss Berthon entered a bedroom at his home. The gas light was burning:

And they were amazed to see, reflected

in the polished surface of the wardrobe, the image of Captain Towns. It was . . . like an ordinary medallion portrait, but life-size. The face appeared wan and pale . . . and he wore a kind of grey flannel jacket, in which he had been accustomed to sleep. Surprised and half alarmed at what they saw, their first idea was that a portrait had been hung in the room and that what they saw was its reflection – but there was no picture of the kind. Whilst they were looking and wondering, my wife’s sister, Miss Towns, came into the room and before any of the others had time to speak she exclaimed: ‘Good gracious! Do you see Papa!’

One of the housemaids passing by was called into the room. Immediately she cried: ‘Oh miss! The Master!’ The captain’s own servant, the butler, and the nurse were also called in and immediately recognised him. Finally Mrs Towns was sent for and, seeing the



apparition, she advanced towards it with her arm extended as if to touch it, and as she passed her hand over the panel of the wardrobe the figure gradually faded away, and never again appeared.

Those parapsychologists who lean to the telepathic origin of all apparitions would probably say that the vision was seen first by either Mrs Letts or Miss Berthon, who then passed it on by thought transference to each arrival. But the question remains: where did

the vision come from in the first place?

One of the early SPR pioneers, F. W. H. Myers, author of the book *Human personality and its survival of bodily death*, suggested that it was the revenant spirit or 'essence' of Captain Towns taking a last look at his old home six weeks after death. Myers said that an apparition 'may be a manifestation of persistent personal energy' and quoted several cases to illustrate his point.

In one a travelling salesman, Mr F.G., arrived at a hotel in Boston, Massachusetts,

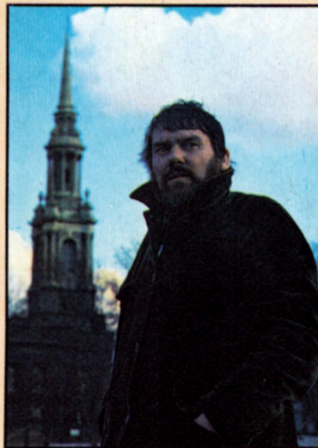
One of the main problems facing the objective psychical researcher is that of sheer human gullibility. People like a good ghost story and tend to embellish the narrative, so that after a few retellings the stark facts of the case become wrapped up in a cocoon of invention.

In the summer of 1970 the author of this series, Frank Smyth, who was at that time an associate editor of the magazine *Man, Myth and Magic*, tried an experiment to examine the form taken by this gullibility. He *invented* a ghost, complete with location, background and 'witnesses' and published the story in the magazine.

The invention was completely random. One Sunday morning Smyth had gone down to London's dockland to meet John Philby, son of super-spy 'Kim' Philby. Philby's building company was renovating a site at Ratcliffe Wharf, and Smyth decided that the deserted dock was sufficiently eerie to provide a location for his ghost. Hard by Ratcliffe Wharf is the semi-derelict church of St Anne, and this, plus the fact that it was a Sunday morning, decided Smyth to make his 'ghost' that of a clergyman. Alongside the wharf runs Ratcliffe Highway, once – at least until the late 19th century – a thoroughfare of brothels, grog shops, and cheap boarding houses. The proximity of this old road suggested to Smyth that his vicar had been the owner of a sailor's rooming house, and that he had robbed 'home-ward-bounders' (seamen newly paid off from ships in the Thames), had killed them in their lodgings, and disposed of their bodies in the river. Thus the background was set up.

Philby, himself a former war correspondent, and Smyth then decided that witnesses were important. They and one of Philby's employees lent their names to the fiction that they had seen the ghost – the figure of an old white haired man with a walking stick. They also agreed that if anyone, either researcher or interested enquirer, asked about the 'phenomenon' they would immediately confess that it was invented.

## The ghost that grew and grew



Smyth then wrote the story as a 'factual' article in *Man, Myth and Magic*. No one ever queried the credentials of the 'Phantom Vicar of Ratcliffe Wharf' but over the next twelve months or so eight books purporting to tell the stories of genuine ghosts appeared, each featuring the phantom vicar. Only one, by a London *Sunday Times* feature writer, treated the subject with some scepticism; the others not only recounted the tale without comment but one, by a well-known writer on the supernatural, actually embellished it.

In 1973 Smyth wrote an article telling of his experiment for the *Sunday Times*, and subsequently appeared in a BBC-2 film produced from Bristol entitled *A leap in the dark*. This film, too, told the story of the invention, but it also featured a number of people who claimed actually to have *seen* the phantom vicar. One man said that he had witnessed an old man in 18th-century clerical garb walking in the roadway outside the 'Town of Ramsgate' pub, near St Katherine's Dock – a good half mile from Ratcliffe Wharf. The writer Jilly Cooper told of interviewing a police superintendent who, on retirement from the River Branch of the Metropolitan force, had said that as a young man he had been unwilling to enter Ratcliffe Wharf for fear of the ghostly priest. A Thames waterman claimed that he had seen the shadowy form of the vicar standing on Ratcliffe Wharf some months before the story appeared in the magazine. After the television programme many other letters were sent to the BBC's Bristol office, most of them apparently sincere, telling of sightings.

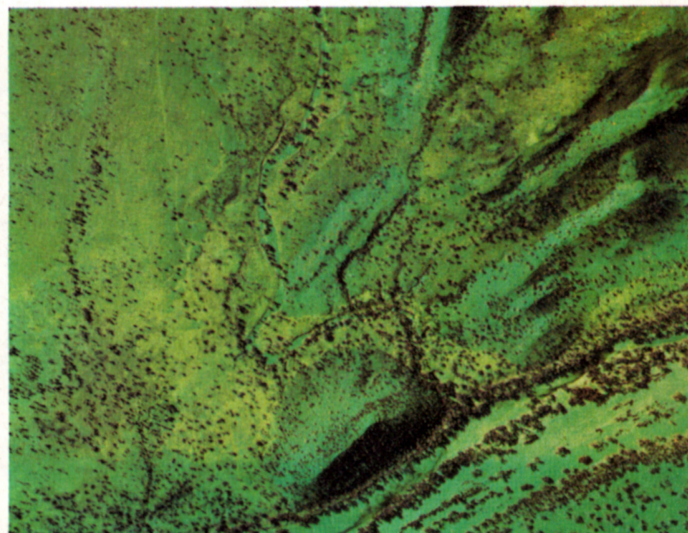
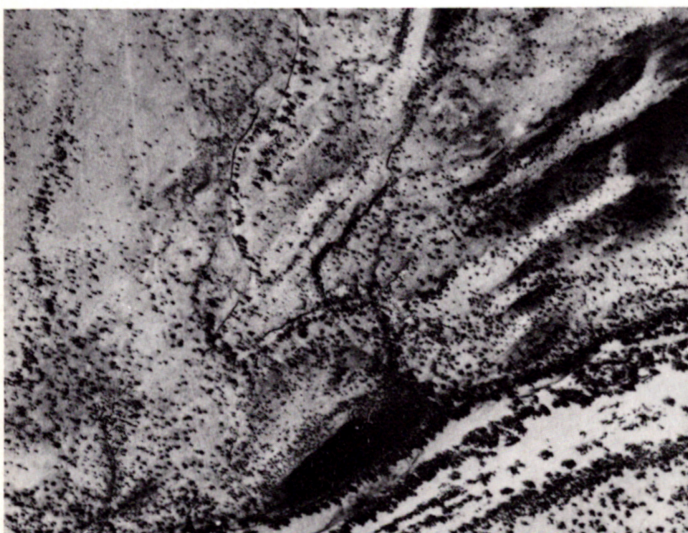
There is absolutely no foundation for the Ratcliffe Wharf story. Nowhere in the record of Wapping – or indeed any other part of London's dockland – does there feature any tale of a ghostly cleric. One psychical researcher suggested that Smyth's ghost may have existed, and somehow made itself felt to him. The fact is that apparently reasonable people still claim to see the apparition in the area – despite its widespread refutation.



one afternoon and sat working in his room. He suddenly became aware of a presence and looked up to see his sister, who had died nine years previously. As he sprang delightedly to his feet and called her name she vanished, and yet he had time to take in every detail. 'She appeared as if alive,' he said, but added that there was a small red scratch on her right cheek.

Disturbed, Mr F.G. made an unscheduled stop at his parents' home and told them of his experience. When he mentioned the scratch, his mother was overcome with emotion, and said that she had made the scratch on the dead body of her daughter accidentally, as she was preparing it for burial. Two weeks later, the mother died.

Myers wrote that the figure was 'not the corpse with the dull mark on which the mother's regretful thoughts might dwell, but . . . the girl in health and happiness, with the symbolic *red* mark worn simply as a test of identity.' He suggested that the apparition



was the spirit of the dead girl inducing her brother to go home and see their mother before she died.

Where an apparition persistently 'haunts' a place or a house – or sometimes even a person – believers in an afterlife assert that the spirit is trapped in its earthly environment, perhaps because of some unfulfilled task, or for the purpose of punishment. Unfortunately, unlike the ghosts of well-rounded fiction, these 'haunting' apparitions do not seem to make much sense in their actions; like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Dr Harris (see page 490), they carry on in a mundane fashion, either wandering about or simply staring out of windows.

By and large parapsychologists as a whole, however, tend to theorise that in certain cases a kind of psychic record may be imprinted on a location, perhaps because of some violence or strong emotion generated there. In these cases, the apparition would not be a sentient spirit, a 'mind', but merely a projection like a cinema film. This certainly seems to be the

Ghost photographs often show images unseen by the human eye, as film is inherently more sensitive to certain light frequencies. The difference is rather like that between a picture shot with a standard film (left) and one taken with infra-red equipment (right). The infra-red photograph shows this tract of Australian desert more clearly and with much sharper detail, and provides information not otherwise available

most likely explanation of, for instance, the Edgehill haunting (see page 490). It also ties in with the telepathy theories; if a person can send an image of himself telepathically to a percipient, may he not also be able to send a sort of 'free floating' image that hangs, as it were, in the atmosphere to be picked up by anyone sensitive enough to receive it?

Such a concept would also explain the occasionally convincing 'photographs' of apparitions; in such cases the photographic film may be more sensitive to the surroundings than its operator; conversely, where a photographer sees a ghost and his camera fails to do so, he may be hypersensitive.

If such phantom recordings are possible, it may be that they are not necessarily fixed for ever. Andrew Green, in his book *Ghost hunting*, quotes an interesting case of a woman in red shoes, red dress and a black head-dress reported to haunt a mansion in 18th-century England. In the early 19th century it was reported that the apparition

was that of a lady in 'pink shoes, pink dress, and a grey head-dress. She was not witnessed again until the mid 19th century, when the figure had dwindled down to 'a lady in a white gown and with grey hair'. Just before the Second World War, all that was reported was 'the sound of a woman walking along the corridor and the swish of her dress'. In 1971, shortly before the demolition of the property involved, workmen felt 'a presence in one of the old corridors'.

All these explanations may account for the mysterious sightings of apparently solid, living beings where no such beings should be. Or perhaps none of them do. Modern scientific research – into, for instance, the baffling field of quantum physics – constantly produces new slants on old phenomena. Ghosts – whether human or non-human – may yet prove to belong to a sphere of reality so far undreamed of in our philosophy.

*Ghost-hunting – how to classify, trap and record your ghost. See page 601*



# The long shadow of fear

**Men in black excited a great deal of attention when they began to threaten UFO witnesses in the 1950s. But the powerful symbol of the sinister black-clad figure is centuries old, as HILARY EVANS explains**

UFO PERCIPIENTS AND INVESTIGATORS are by no means the only people to receive visits from men in black. Researchers Kevin and Sue McClure, investigating the North Wales religious revival of 1905, found accounts that bear at least a *prima facie* similarity to the current MIB phenomenon:

In the neighbourhood dwells an exceptionally intelligent young woman of the peasant class, whose bedroom has been visited three nights in succession at midnight by a man dressed in black. This figure has delivered a message to the girl which, however, she is forbidden to relate.

The young woman in question, farmer's wife-turned-preacher Mary Jones – one of the leading figures of the revival – was well known for the mysterious lights that appeared as she pursued her mission. On one occasion when she encountered her sinister visitor at night, Mary was 'rescued' by one of her lights, which darted a white ray at the apparition. The MIB promptly vanished.

It all sounds like the wildest fantasy – except that there is substantial evidence for some of the phenomena reported, many of which were seen by several independent witnesses, some of them avowedly sceptical. Does this mean that the MIBs *really* existed, *really* appeared in the bedroom of that 'intelligent young woman of the peasant class'? What we are learning about the current wave of MIBs may help us to understand similar cases reported in earlier periods.

Men in black turn up, in one form or another, in the folklore of every country, and periodically they emerge from legend



Above: Montague Summers (1880–1948), a writer who found a number of historical MIB cases – years before the first modern, UFO-related MIB encounter in 1953

Below: the Last Judgement, by Fra Angelico (c.1400–1455): the damned (right) are being dragged off to hell by black demons. Some modern writers have gone as far as to suggest an identification between these sinister figures and MIBs

into everyday life. On 2 June 1603, a young country lad confessed before a court in south-west France to several acts of werewolfery, culminating in kidnapping and eating a child. He stated that he was acting under the orders of the Lord of the Forest, to whom he was bond-slave. The Lord of the Forest he described as a tall dark man, dressed all in black, and riding a black horse.

## Under the cover of darkness

Montague Summers, who reports the case in his book *The werewolf* (1933), has no hesitation in identifying this and all other MIBs with the Devil of Christian teaching, and this continues to be a widespread interpretation: even today there are theorists who claim that UFOs are diabolical in origin, and the MIBs consequently must be Satan's agents. In the parts of the world where the prevailing religious doctrine presupposes two warring factions of good and evil, good is equated with light and evil with darkness, the agents of good tend to be blond and dressed in white, while the agents of evil have dark hair and are dressed in black. Other connotations follow naturally. Under cover of darkness, all kinds of tricks can be carried out and crimes committed. Darkness is also associated with winter, and so with death: in almost all parts of the world, death rites and customs are associated with the colour black.

So, whatever his specific role, the MIB is a distinctly sinister figure. He is a trickster, not working openly; he stands for lies rather than truth, death rather than life.

Because of the obviously symbolic elements involved, many theorists speculate that MIBs are not flesh-and-blood creatures at all, but mental constructs projected from the imagination of the percipient, and taking on a form that blends traditional legend with contemporary imagery. But it can't be quite that simple: too many of the accounts





show evidence of relating to physical creatures moving in the real, physical world.

To those who report MIB encounters, there are several possible origins. At his most concrete, the MIB is supposed to be the representative of an official department; sometimes as straightforward and above-board as the Air Force, sometimes a more covert organisation such as the CIA or FBI. The average American, in particular, seems

Below: a representation of the demon god Kal Bahairab from the Hanuman Doka temple in Nepal. The god was always shown with a hideous face, four arms and – significantly – black skin. Human beings were, in former times, sacrificed to it to satisfy its lust for blood



far from convinced that investigative bodies such as the CIA are necessarily working in the public interest, and the same attitude of mind as has evolved the conspiracy theories about UFOs, that a gigantic cover-up is being mounted by the government, suggests that the MIBs are part of this operation, their sole object being to conceal the facts by silencing witnesses and purloining photographs and other evidence.

The fact that the identities of a great many MIBs have been checked, and they have invariably been found not to be the persons they purport to be, lends strength to this suspicion, which can amount to virtual paranoia. Thus in 1970 an American theorist, Tony Kimery, wrote in all seriousness:

The mysterious MIB and the entire collection of their thugs, henchmen, and highly trained intelligence officers, are a big part of the complex UFO phenomena which is in turn part of another big and complex phenomena (*sic*). It is known that projects by them are now under way for the complete control of . . . political, financial,

religious and scientific institutions. They – the MIB – have a very long background and history that stretches back for centuries, indicating a massive build-up of concentration to where it is today.

MIBs are often reported as dark skinned, as having either defective command of English, or conversely an over-precise, over-meticulous way of speaking that suggests that they are not speaking a tongue natural to them. Mary Hyre, a West Virginia journalist, noted that a strange visitor picked up a ball-point pen from her desk and examined it with amazement, as if he had never seen anything like it before. And UFO percipient Mrs Ralph Butler, who received a visit from a man who claimed to be an Air Force major, was astonished to find that he was so unfamiliar with American food that he had to be shown how to eat it. The implication is that they are foreigners, an attitude encouraged by American xenophobia. Curiously, though, no witness appears to have suggested that the MIBs are of Russian origin: where specific details are mentioned, it is always implied that they are vaguely 'oriental'. Slanting eyes are frequently reported; the deadpan faces suggest the inscrutable Asiatic; sometimes heads are totally bald. (By linking 'the yellow peril' with the 'man in black', of course, it is possible to frighten oneself with two bogeymen for the price of one!)

Although witnesses rarely state openly that they believe their visitors to come from beyond Earth, this is often clearly implied. Bender's three men were clearly of alien origin. Other MIBs have displayed behaviour traits that seem to suggest that they are able to function only for a limited time-span: after a while they insist that they have to leave, or take pills, or ask for water, and sometimes show signs of losing strength.

A further possibility remains: that the MIBs are neither flesh-and-blood (even extra-terrestrial flesh-and-blood) on the one hand, nor pure hallucination/illusion on the other, but something in between. The entities encountered in a recent French case seem to have existed, if existed is the word, on some alternative plane of being.

### Abduction and threats

The alleged abduction, in December 1979, of Franck Fontaine for seven days on board a UFO was one of the rare French cases to have attracted worldwide attention. The abduction itself was of course the central event of the case, but it was only the start of a series of incidents: one of these, involving MIBs, concerned another member of the trio, Jean-Pierre Prévost, who told this story:

'The night of Friday the seventh to Saturday the eighth of December 1979, Franck, Salomon and I had sat up talking for a long time, and went to bed sometime around 5 to 5.30 in the morning. At 7 there was a ring at the door: Salomon and Franck didn't hear it,

Below: Richard Baxter, a 17th-century writer, who recounted the tale of a London woman of the time – a 'pious, credible woman' – who was encouraged to hang herself by the Devil in the shape of a big black man. The archetype of black as a symbol of evil reappears in the MIB myth





## Men in black

so I went to open the door. I found myself in the presence of three fellows. One was of average height, very well dressed in dark green, almost black, black tie, white shirt, and waistcoat to match his suit; he had a fringe of beard, black like his hair, and a moustache. His general appearance was pretty good. The others were bigger than him, taller and more heavily built.

'What follows, I haven't told the police – I reported the visit itself to them – because we've already had enough of being taken for crackpots! But these two types, with the bearded man, didn't really exist, that I'm certain of! In the first place, they had no sight. That's hard to explain: they fixed me with their eyes, but those eyes were nothing but a white mass, all over. They were terrifying!

'The bearded fellow asked me, Are you one of the three?, by which obviously he meant, was I one of the three people concerned in the Ciergy-Pontoise case? I said yes, and he went on, Good, in that case, you can pass the word to your companions: you've already said too much. An accident will happen to you. And if you say any more, it will be more serious than that . . .

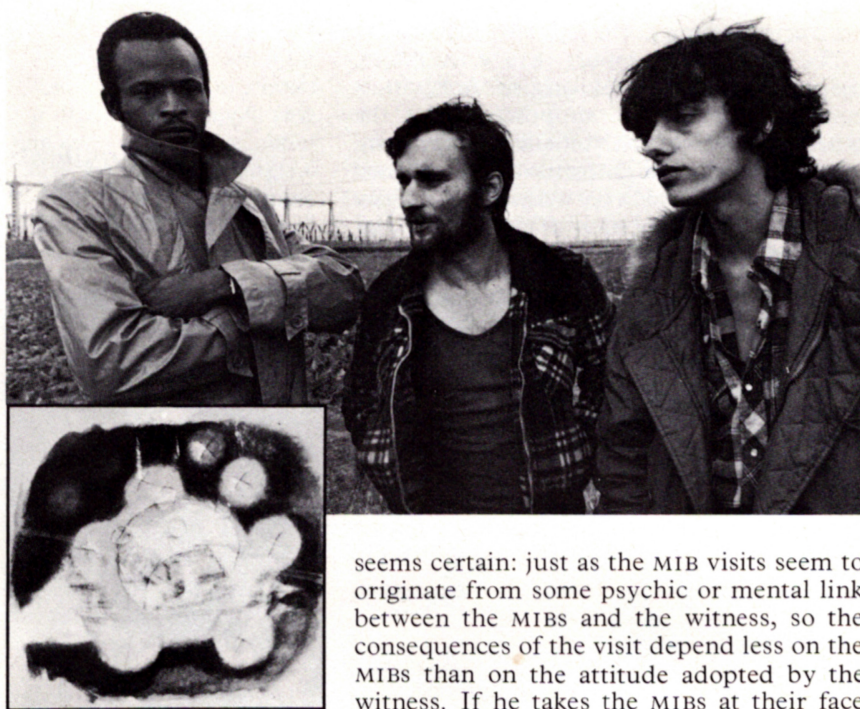
'And with that they vanished; but how, that's something I can't begin to explain. They didn't take the lift, I'd have heard it if they did; and even more so if they'd used the stairs, the door makes a deafening row! I went to the window that overlooks the parking lot. I can tell you definitely that all night, at least until 5 a.m. or later, we'd noticed a Ford Capri in metallic green standing beneath our window, a Ford that we didn't recognise. Well, when I looked down, there was this Ford, just starting up. How had they managed to get to it without using the stairs or the lift? Complete mystery.

'I woke up Franck and Salomon and we went to the police, without giving them the unbelievable details about the two toughs. The police said, So long as they didn't actually attack or wound you, there's nothing we can do, so get back home. And that was that.'

### Forces of evil

Jean-Pierre told investigators that he had seen the three men on several subsequent occasions. Generally, it was simply a matter of seeing them across the street or at a market, but on one occasion he received another warning while he was in a tobacco store buying cigarettes, telling him to keep quiet about their experiences and making threats. Subsequently, under hypnosis, Jean-Pierre indicated that the entities were not extra-terrestrials but *intra*-terrestrials, forces of evil from inside the Earth. He also added – intriguingly – that the bearded man had been real but that his two henchmen had been unreal.

Cases such as this are made baffling by their inconsequentiality. But one thing



Salomon N'Diaye, Jean-Pierre Prévost and Franck Fontaine (above, left to right) were involved in a famous case of alleged abduction by the UFO shown in the sketch (inset). Prévost was later the victim of a threatening visit from MIBs

seems certain: just as the MIB visits seem to originate from some psychic or mental link between the MIBs and the witness, so the consequences of the visit depend less on the MIBs than on the attitude adopted by the witness. If he takes the MIBs at their face value, if he believes their threats, he is liable to find himself heading for a breakdown: paranoia may develop, and he may believe himself followed everywhere, harassed by paranormal happenings such as strange telephone calls and poltergeist phenomena. It is even possible that these second-stage phenomena are genuine as far as the victim himself is concerned: they are manifestations of his fears – but none the less real for that – and will not disappear until he capitulates and gives up his UFO studies, if he is an investigator, or keeps quiet about his experiences if he is a witness.

If, on the other hand, he braves the matter out – if he refuses to abandon his investigation, continues to tell the world of his experiences – it seems the MIBs are powerless against him. Carlos de los Santos, stopped on his way to a television interview by a gang of tough, threatening characters, was momentarily scared; he turned his car round, went home and cancelled the interview. But a friend reassured him and persuaded him not to let himself be intimidated: a fortnight later he gave the interview – and there wasn't a squeak from the MIBs!

The MIB phenomenon is clearly worth studying carefully. Whatever the nature of the MIBs – whether they are wholly illusory, or whether there is a measure of reality in them – they exert a great deal of power over the minds of their victims. The better we understand them, the more we may learn about how such power may be deployed. And, if for no other reason, the MIB phenomenon is important because it gives the sociologist a chance to study a legend in the making. The sinister MIB masquerade provides us with contemporary phenomena that rank with the witch, the vampire and the werewolf of times past.

#### Further reading

Gray Barker, *They knew too much about flying saucers*, Werner Laurie, 1958

Albert K. Bender, *Flying saucers and the three men*, Saucerian Press (Clarksburg, USA) 1962

John A. Keel, *Operation Trojan Horse*, Souvenir Press 1970



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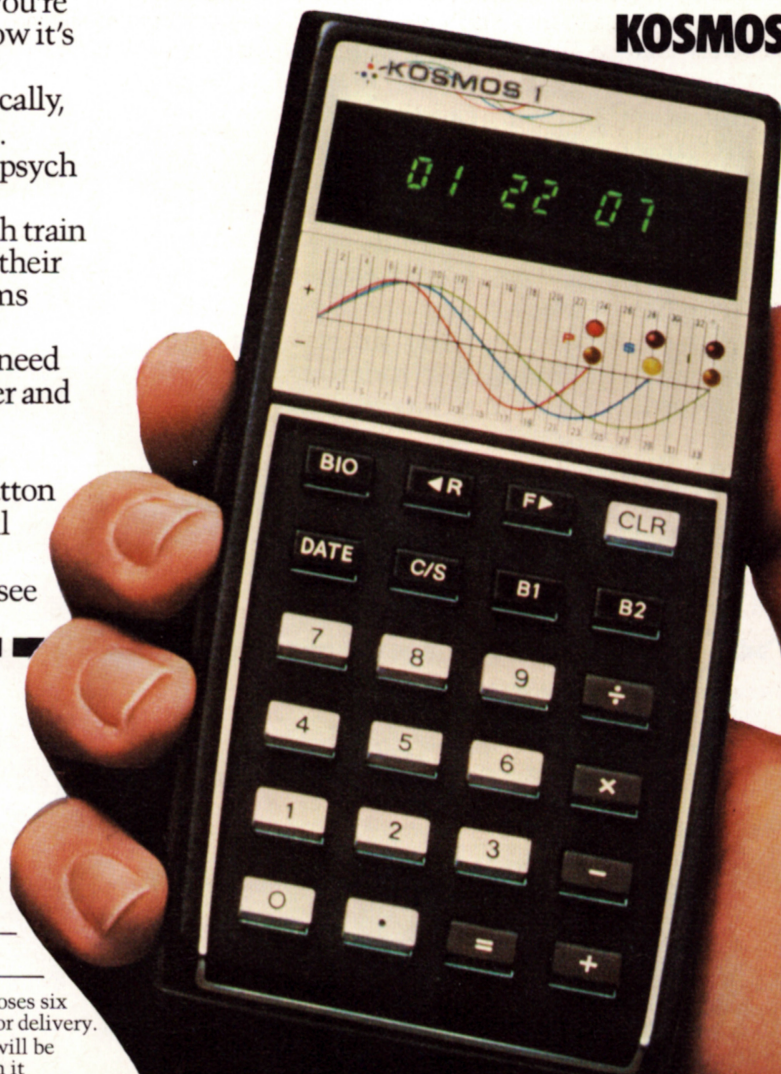
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